



## Raccoons

Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are one of the most recognizable furbearers in urban and suburban environments. Their ringed tail and masked face easily identifies them and has earned them the name “masked bandit.” Although they can appear to be cute and cuddly, many people have come to regard them as a nuisance when they eat crops, or tear apart garbage. Despite this strained relationship, raccoons remain a valuable furbearer species throughout the United States. To make it clear to raccoons that humans are not a source of free food, we must change our habits to maintain the beneficial relationship that we have with raccoons and other wildlife.

### LIFE HISTORY

**Range and Habitat:** Raccoons prefer wooded habitat adjacent to streams, ponds, or wetlands, but they have also become well adapted to living in agricultural and suburban areas. Raccoons range from the East Coast of the United States, all the way to the West Coast, but are absent from the area just east of the Rocky Mountains. They range south into Mexico, and north into Canada.

Studies of raccoons have shown population densities that range from 1 to 15 animals per acre. Densities are dependent on quality of habitat, including food availability. High population numbers in suburban and urban environments are due to readily available food sources.

**Behavior:** Raccoons are typically nocturnal, but can be active during the day, particularly at dawn and dusk. They are not true hibernators but may den up during extended cold periods in hollow logs, trees, rock crevices, ground burrows, or barns.

**Reproduction:** Offspring are born in mid to late spring, after a gestation period of 60 to 73 days. Between two and seven young are born in each litter, and one litter per year is born to each mating female. Females prefer tree cavities to give birth and raise their young. In the absence of tree cavities they will often use chimneys or buildings. Juvenile raccoons are unable to open their eyes during their first three weeks, and their ear canals are also closed for this period. Males do not take part in raising the young at all.

**Food Habits:** Raccoons are omnivorous, which means they eat both plant material and meat. Their natural diet includes nuts, fruits, grains, insects, frogs, eggs, small mammals, fish and birds. They are a very opportunistic species and will also eat food such as birdseed, garbage, and pet food.

### DISEASE

Raccoons can contract and transmit [rabies](#) and [raccoon roundworm](#) to humans and pets, and [canine distemper](#) to dogs. Never attempt to capture or handle a raccoon or other wild mammal whether it looks sick, injured or healthy. Any contact between a raccoon or other wild mammal and a person should be reported to a physician immediately.

### IDENTIFICATION

- Medium-sized mammal with a long, pointed snout and bushy tail
- Fur: Grayish-brown with black markings around eyes and black and off-white ringed tail
- Length: 18-28 in (tail 8 - 12 in)
- Weight: 12-35 lbs
- Lifespan: 2-3 years

## REGULATORY STATUS

In Rhode Island, raccoons are classified as protected furbearers and Rhode Island state law (*RIGL 20-16-2*) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in *RIGL 20-16-1*) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the DEM within 24 hours.

The DEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured.

[Click here](#) to find a Licensed Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist near you.

For additional resources visit:  
[www.wildlifehelp.org](http://www.wildlifehelp.org)

## LIVING WITH RACCOONS

As an opportunistic species, raccoons will commonly scavenge in unsecured garbage containers left outdoors. They can also make their way into unsecured poultry coops and may cause considerable damage to eggs and birds. Some characteristics of raccoon predation are the removal of the head and crop of the birds, chewed and eaten breast, and bits of flesh found near water sources. Raccoons are able to grasp with their front feet and will sometimes reach their paws through fencing to get at chicks. Eggs can be completely removed from the nest, or eaten on site.

Raccoons can cause substantial crop damage, particularly to newly ripened sweet corn. Corn stalks will usually show damage, and can be completely knocked over. Individual ears may even be peeled back. Raccoons are particularly fond of apples, grapes, pears and other fruits. They can also damage bird feeders while trying to get to the seed.

## DID YOU KNOW?

- The species name, *lotor*, translates to “washer-man” because raccoons are notorious for washing their food.
- Raccoons have a thousand nerve endings in their front paws.
- The word “raccoon” was translated into English from the Powhatan language by Captain John Smith.
- During the first 3 weeks of life, raccoons cannot see or hear.
- Raccoons have excellent dexterity and can manipulate latches and lids off trash cans and other containers.

## TIPS FOR PREVENTING PROBLEMS WITH RACCOONS

### Trash bins or dumpsters

- Trash should be secured in containers and only put out on the curb the morning of trash collection.
- Rocks or bricks can be used to weigh down lids.

### Compost

- Keep compost piles covered.

### Pet food dishes

- Avoid feeding pets outside or bring in dishes at night.

### Livestock

- Secure livestock in pens or buildings.
- Remove overhanging branches.
- Ensure top is covered and secure.

### Crops

- Place electric fencing around crops about 6in and 12in off the ground. Leave on from dusk until dawn.
- Remove overhanging branches.

## NEVER INTENTIONALLY FEED WILDLIFE

It is illegal in Rhode Island and will create problems for both humans and wildlife.